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Christmas Customs

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Now that Christmas is fast approaching and the year has once more come full circle, most of us will soon be busy adorning the house with brightly colored decorations, a Christmas tree and all the other paraphernalia that goes to create a festive atmosphere.

Holly and mistletoe will almost certainly be included in our decorations as evergreens have been used in the winter festivities from very ancient times and definitely long before Christianity appeared on the scene.

What Christians celebrate as the birthday of Christ is really something that was superimposed on to a much earlier pagan festival-that which celebrated the Winter Solstice or the time when the Sun reaches its lowest point south and is reborn at the beginning of a new cycle of seasons.

In Northern Europe and Scandinavia it was noted by the early Christian scholar, Bede, that the heathens began the year on December 25th which they called Mother's Night in honor of the great Earth Mother. Their celebrations were held in order to ensure fertility and abundance during the coming year, and these included much feasting, burning of lamps, lighting of great fires (the Yule fires) and exchanges of gifts.

The Romans, too, held their great celebrations-Saturnalia- from December 17th to 25th and it was the latter date which they honored as the birthday of the Unconquered Sun. The Saturnalia was characterized by much merry-making, sometimes going to riotous extremes, with masters and slaves temporarily exchanging roles. The use of evergreens to decorate the streets and houses was also very much in evidence at this great winter festival.

That we now celebrate the birth of Christ at the same time is largely due to the early Church Fathers who found it was much easier to win converts to the faith by making Christ's birthday coincide with an already long established pagan festival. In fact, it wasn't until the 4th century that Pope Julius I finally established the 25th as the official birthday of Christ; earlier Christians differed widely as to this date- some choosing September 29th, while others held that January 6th or March 29th were the correct dates.

As we have seen, the pagan element in Christmas lives on in the festival at the Winter Solstice. But these elements are also very much alive in our use of evergreens as decorations at this time of year.

Like most evergreens, the holly and mistletoe have long been held to symbolize eternal life, regeneration and rebirth.

Holly, with its bright red berries and dark spiky foliage, has been revered from ancient times as a symbol of life everlasting. It was associated with strength and masculinity and was considered useful in the treatment of various ailments which were seen to lower the vital spirits.

In old England, a decoction of holly leaves was considered a cure for worms; but most of all this prickly evergreen was looked upon as a luck bringer-particularly in rural areas where a bunch of holly hung in the cow shed or stable was thought to favor the animals if placed there on Christmas Eve. Many people used to take a piece of holly from the church decorations at Christmas as a charm against bad luck in the coming year. Holly was also considered a very protective tree which, if planted outside the house, was believed to avert lightning, fire and the evil spells of witches.

An old holly spell describes how to know one's future spouse. At midnight on a Friday, nine holly leaves must be plucked and tied with nine knots in a three-cornered cloth. This is then placed under the pillow and, provided silence is observed from the time of plucking until dawn the next day, your future spouse will come to you in your dreams.

In certain areas of Wales, it was thought extremely unlucky to bring holly into the house before December 24th and if you did so there would be family quarrels and domestic upheavals. You would also be inviting disaster if you burned green holly or squashed the red berries.

Turning now to mistletoe, it seems that this is by far the most mystical of the plants associated with Christmas and has, from very ancient times, been treated as magical or sacred. It is often included in modern Christmas decorations simply for the fun of kissing beneath it and, though this seems to be a peculiarly English custom, it probably harks back to the mistletoe's association with fertility.

The real reason why mistletoe is now associated with Christmas is very much a carry-over from ancient practices, when it was considered as somehow belonging to the gods. The Roman historian, Pliny, gives an early account of how the Druids would hold a very solemn ceremony at the Winter Solstice when the mistletoe had to be gathered, for the Druids looked upon this unusual plant, which has no roots in the earth, as being of divine origin or produced by lightning. Mistletoe which grew on the oak was considered especially potent in magical virtues, for it was the oak that the Druids held as sacred to the gods.

At the Winter Solstice, the Druids would lead a procession into the forest and, on finding the sacred plant growing on an oak, the chief priest, dressed all in white, would climb the tree and cut the mistletoe with a knife or sickle made of gold. The mistletoe was not allowed to touch the ground and was therefore caught in a white linen cloth.

On securing the sacred mistletoe, the Druids would then carry it to their temple where it would be laid beneath the altar stone for three days. Early on the fourth day, which would correspond to our Christmas Day, it was taken out, chopped into pieces and handed out among the worshippers. The berries were used by the priests to heal various diseases.

Mistletoe was considered something of a universal panacea, as can be gleaned from the ancient Celtic word for it-uile, which literally translated means 'all-healer'. A widespread belief was that mistletoe could cure anything from headaches to epilepsy; and indeed modern research has shown that the drug guipsine which is used in the treatment of nervous illnesses and high blood pressure is contained in mistletoe.

Until quite recently the rural folk of Sweden and Switzerland believed that the mistletoe could only be picked at certain times and in a special way if its full potency as healer and protector was to be secured. The Sun must be in Sagittarius (close to the Winter Solstice) and the Moon must be on the wane and, following ancient practices, the mistletoe must not be just picked but shot or knocked down and caught before reaching the ground.

Not only was mistletoe looked upon as a healer of all ills, but if hung around the house was believed to protect the home against fire and other hazards. As the mistletoe was supposed to have been produced by lightning, it had the power to protect the home against thunder bolts by a kind of sympathetic magic.

Of great importance, however, was the power of mistletoe to protect against witchcraft and sorcery. This is evident in an old superstition which holds that a sprig of mistletoe placed beneath the pillow will avert nightmares (once considered to be the product of evil demons).

In the north of England, it used to be the practice of farmers to give mistletoe to the first cow that calved after New Year's Day. This was believed to ensure health to the stock and a good milk yield throughout the year. Underlying this old belief is the fear of witches or mischievous fairy folk who could play havoc with dairy produce, so here mistletoe was used as a counter magic against such evil influences. In Sweden, too, a bunch of this magical plant hung from the living room ceiling or in the stable or cow-shed was thought to render trolls powerless to work mischief.

With such a tremendous array of myth, magic and folklore associated with it, reaching far back into the pagan past, it is understandable that even today this favorite Christmas plant is forbidden in many churches. Yet even the holly and the ivy, much celebrated in a popular carol of that title, were once revered as sacred and magical by our pre-Christian ancestors.

In view of what has been said, one could speculate that even if Christianity had never emerged it is more than likely that we would still be getting ready for the late-December festivities, putting up decorations, including holly and mistletoe, in order to celebrate the rebirth of the Sun, the great giver and sustainer of all earthly life.

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